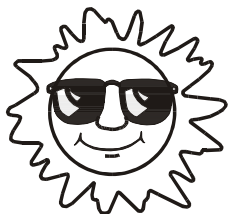


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Lawn Care Tips to Get You Through the Summer

Summer can be a high stress time for many lawns in central Virginia. There are several things you can do to help minimize this stress and help your lawn survive the heat and drought of summer.

Mowing: It is best to mow cool season lawns, such as fescue and bluegrass, as high as possible, no less than 2 ½ inches and preferably 3 ½ inches, especially during dry periods. This will help keep the soil shaded, reduce moisture loss, and inhibit weeds, which rob the grass of both nutrients and moisture. Mow warm season grasses, such as Bermuda and Zoysia, at 1 ½ to 2 ½ inches. It is important to keep the mower blades very sharp. This may mean sharpening the blade several times during the mowing season. A sharp blade makes a clean cut, which can heal quickly. A dull mower blade tends to tear the leaf blades leaving jagged edges which turn brown and which also allow disease organisms easier access. Mow in the evening to give the lawn a chance to recover during the cooler part of the day.

Watering: New lawns typically need watering the first year, if dry conditions prevail. This means providing at least one inch of water per week. It is best to water deeply every three to four days, providing about ½ inch of water each time. More frequent, light waterings can often do more harm than good because they encourage fungal infections and shallow root growth. To determine if you are getting down ½ inch each time, set several flat bottomed containers around the lawn to collect the water from the sprinkler. Time how long it takes to collect ½ inch of water and write this down for future reference. The best time to water is early in the morning, before 11 o'clock, if possible. Evaporation losses will be less when it is cooler out and the grass will have sufficient time to dry before evening, reducing the chances for fungal diseases to infect the grass. If your lawn is very large and you do not have an irrigation system, try watering a section each day on a regular rotation.

If your lawn is well established (1-2 years), you may choose to allow the grass to go dormant during the dry summer months. Although the lawn will look brown, generally it will green up as soon as regular rainfall resumes. Whichever you decide to do, it is important to stick with it. On again/off again watering increases stress on the lawn, because it requires extra energy each time the grass plants come out of dormancy.

Fertilization and Liming: If you have a cool season lawn, DO NOT fertilize during the spring or summer. (A late May application of fertilizer at half rate is okay, if there is plenty of rainfall, otherwise don't.) If you have a warm season lawn, fertilize during the spring and early part of the summer, but avoid later fertilization, especially if there is no rainfall and no irrigation. Lime may be applied at any time, if a soil test indicates that it is required. However, if there is no rainfall and you cannot water it in, it is better to wait until rain is expected.

Brown Patch: Brown patch is a very common summer lawn disease in this area. The classic symptom is a circular area of brown, dead grass surrounded by a narrow, darker ring. The patches may be several inches to several feet in diameter. If your lawn is infected by brown patch, do not panic. Although the top of the plant has turned brown, generally the crown is not killed and the plant will send up new leaves when the weather turns cooler and rainfall resumes. If you choose to treat brown patch with a fungicide, be sure to read and follow the label directions. Most products require repeated applications at 2-3 week intervals for as long as conditions are favorable for the disease (temperatures in the upper 60°'s to mid 80°'s F and high humidity). These products will prevent further spread of the disease but will not "cure" the already infected areas. Low mowing heights will increase the severity of the problem, so be sure to keep your mower set as high as possible.

By following the above tips, your lawn should survive the summer with minimal loss of cover. Aeration, overseeding, and repairs in early September for cool season grasses will return your lawn to its pre-summer beauty in short time. Warm season lawns will generally come through the summer with flying colors and, come September, they will be getting ready to take a rest for the winter.

Please call the Extension Office (751-4401) if you have any questions about caring for your lawn.